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Book Reviews

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## Review of *Political Blackness in Multiracial Britain* by Mohan Ambikaipaker (University of Pennsylvania Press)

**Helen Kapstein**

**ABSTRACT** Mohan Ambikaipaker's "Political Blackness in Multiracial Britain" is distinctive both for its setting and for its personal engagement. Ambikaipaker practiced "activist anthropology" by carrying out "observant participation" as a caseworker for the Newham Monitoring Project, a community activism organization, over the course of two years. The book alternates between anecdotal accounts of racism and the author's theoretical and historical framing of those accounts. Ambikaipaker's writing is compelling, his theoretical grounding is thorough, his empathy is apparent, and the fieldwork underpinning it is considerable and consequential.

*Political Blackness in Multiracial Britain*. By Mohan Ambikaipaker. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018, 254 pp. (hardcover) ISBN 9780812250305. US List: \$65.00.

In a line-up from the University of Pennsylvania Press's Ethnography of Political Violence series that skews heavily towards books about occupied territories and genocides, Mohan Ambikaipaker's *Political Blackness in Multiracial Britain* shines through, distinctive both for its setting and for its personal engagement.

The book begins as it means to go on, with a specific story that ends tragically about racist harassment in the London suburb of Newham. By giving Amina's "parable" to us first, Ambikaipaker deliberately prioritizes her narrative over his own, in keeping with his goal of examining the "lived experiences of racial violence and racialized state violence as well as the lived experience of engaging in antiracist activism" (xiii). To achieve this, Ambikaipaker practiced "activist anthropology" by carrying out "observant participation" as a caseworker for the Newham Monitoring Project, a community activism organization, over the course of two years (xiii). The book alternates between anecdotal accounts of racism and the author's theoretical and historical framing of those accounts. Despite the particularity of individual stories (or perhaps because of them), Ambikaipaker's ambition is broad: to perform "a critical analysis of the western liberal social order in Britain" (24).

By practicing ethnography in the place where it might not normally be expected, Ambikaipaker actively works against the idea that it is a "colonial form of knowledge production" (xiii). He also demonstrates just how postcolonial, multiracial, diverse, and whatever other synonym you want to insert here Britain is today. This is a direct result of empire and its legacies, and yet Ambikaipaker shows how much the state and its narratives rely on "a forgetting of the British Empire" (20). Instead, black Britons are reconstrued as "immigrants and interlopers" (20), and thereby excluded from power sharing in an environment predicated on "everyday political whiteness" (26),

Ambikaipaker's pithy coinage that sums up the ways in which ideological and repressive state apparatuses align to prefer whites and whiteness.

Ambikaipaker's frankness about the complicated position he has put himself in, including the gap between his expectations of his embedded experience and its realities, is a big part of the appeal of this book. He encounters racism amongst the targets of racism, he discovers that official antiracist processes are often "race-making sites," and he struggles to enter and reside in Britain in the political atmosphere after the War on Terror (xiii). As a result of these ambiguities and impediments, he says, "I did not encounter myself as different from other black people who were similarly struggling to make social meaning and achieve political resolution about their collective...struggles with British racism" (37).

That said, Ambikaipaker *is* different from his informants, by virtue of his temporary assignment, his education and profession, and, for some, his class and gender. These differences poignantly manifest themselves when he realizes he has polished off the food in a household stricken by food scarcity. The inclusion of this moment in the book demonstrates Ambikaipaker's self-awareness; his insertion in their lives has real effects and real limits. Keen to put his interviewees on a level playing field with himself, he gives them a voice frequently and often at length. For instance, here's part of what Sarah says about one experience as a Muslim woman: "They could have easily hit us, but why didn't they hit us, the women in the family? The only explanation I have in my head was physically we didn't look different. Coz the men did, they had their beards. Us, the women in the house, didn't have no scarves or nothing, we didn't have our scarves" (146–47). Quotations such as this make me wonder about the ethics of verbatim quoting. Yes, Sarah has a voice, but she sounds less eloquent than the author does. On the other hand, Ambikaipaker characterizes these narratives not as voices but as "screams," which he says we must develop a capacity for listening to so as to become accountable to their sufferings and hopes. Screams aren't supposed to be eloquent.

The counter to "everyday political whiteness," according to the author, is "political blackness," and Ambikaipaker is good about explaining why he has landed on that term, what critiques of it exist, and how he counters those critiques (78). Ultimately, political blackness for him is "a practical possibility," and it's through this lens that we see his unfolding understanding of the situation and its contexts (78).

The first three chapters of the book establish the terms of the debate and offer examples of individual struggles against racism and racial violence. The second three chapters move away from colonial racist hangovers into a discussion of being Muslim in a time of high anxiety about terrorism and the justifications for violence and intolerance that allows a society to make. The book operates on many levels—it's a history of the NMP (which sometimes goes a little too deep into the weeds), it's a theory of cultural anthropology, it's an indictment of the British state's maintenance of institutional racism, and it's a call to "[show] up and...forge solidarities that do not as yet exist" (202). It's rare that I find an academic book I'm interested in reading from cover to cover, but this is that rare thing. Ambikaipaker's writing is compelling, his theoretical grounding is thorough, his empathy is apparent, and the fieldwork underpinning it is considerable and consequential.

#### Bio

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Helen Kapstein is an Associate Professor in the English Department at John Jay College, The City University of New York. She earned her PhD in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia University. A postcolonial scholar, her areas of interest include South African literature and culture,

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